

Community Support Network: Delivering Services to People with Disabilities

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Over the last thirty years, local communities have changed the ways in which they provide services to individuals with Mental Retardation or Developmental Disabilities (MRDD). Whereas MRDD clients were once housed in large residential institutions, they now live in smaller, supported living settings in the community.



Living in community settings presents new challenges. Individuals with MRDD face a higher incidence of mental illnesses, obesity, and other health problems. Confounding the problem is a shortage of physicians willing to accept them as patients, due in part to a lack of training and understanding of their special needs. High support staff turnover and communication difficulties further exacerbate the problem, putting these individuals at greater risk for malnutrition, medication errors, and delays in seeking necessary care. Working with local patient advocacy groups and Tennessee's medicare staff, the University of Tennessee's Health Science Center (UTHSC) will create the **MRDD Community Support Network**.

The Community Support Network will provide support services directly to clients and community based training seminars to care givers and others working and living with individuals with MRDD. Using videoconferencing technology, the Community Support Network will connect 25 residential centers and 65 home-based patients to social and clinical services. The system will be available 24 hours a day. Any time a crisis occurs in the home, care givers will be able to use a video phone to access trained professionals who will guide care givers through the problems they face. By enhancing access to needed services, the Community Support Network will improve the health status and quality of life for individuals with MRDD and their caregivers.

